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Roberta Venco Ricciardi

PICTORIAL GRAFFITI IN THE CITY OF HATRA*

Hatra is the large Arab city of the Parthian period in the Jazirah of Northern Iraq. It is mainly studied on account of its religious features and its famous architecture of richly decorated temples and the extraordinary sculpture of religious divinities and human figures, the latter mainly priests and the inhabitants of the city praying and doing homage to the gods.

The few sculptures found in the houses, are essentially religious too, and evidently served domestic worship.¹ The representations are usually rigid and frontal, though there are many three-quarter faces,² and even the reliefs composed of several persons do not form a scene. This frontality is typical of Parthian art. And is particularly apparent in the western towns, such as Dura Europos, Palmyra and Hatra, which lie on the fringes of the Parthian world.

Little attention, on the other hand, has so far been paid to the other aspects of Hatra culture. In an attempt to fill at least some of these gaps, the Italian expedition of the University of Torino has not only excavated a large house, Building A, with a N-S street in the northern part of the city,³ but is currently engaged in investigating the city's chronology, especially that of the Temenos, and above all in collecting and documenting the enormous amount of data that is only partially published, if at all, and is being rapidly lost in the work of reconstruction or the collapse of the structures themselves. In particular wall plaster very quickly deteriorates and falls off, taking with it everything including valuable graffiti and paintings.

In contrast with Dura, where painting predominates, Hatra has very few examples of painting, and all of this in civil buildings. This obviously may be a matter of chance. Dura's great pictorial cycles, in fact, mostly come from religious buildings preserved under the embankment erected to defend the city from the Sasanians, but painted evidence also come from

* I wish to thank Dr. Muayyad Sa'îd Demerji, Director General of Antiquities, who allowed me to study these graffiti, which mostly come from the Directorate General of Antiquities excavations at Hatra, and M.A. Mustafa, who provided me with the original tracings of some wall graffiti. Exception made for the "gazelle" hunting scene on Fig. 7 (from M.A. Mustafa), all the graffiti here reproduced were traced from the walls by members of the Italian Archaeological Expedition at Hatra, in particular by T. Violi. Most of them are now destroyed as the walls plaster is fallen down.

¹ In Building A, a statue of a young god was found, together with two fragmentary Nikai, Venco Ricciardi 1987: 40-41, Figs. 28-29.

² See the musicians frieze from the Allat temple al-Najafi (1981), and a priest statue from the Eastern city gate, al-Salihi (1993).

³ Venco Ricciardi 1987, 1988, 1989

other religious and civil buildings of the city. The few civil buildings unearthed at Hatra have only been partly published. In any event, there is no evidence of painting in Hatra's temples.

The paintings, now few, must have been much more numerous originally, as traces are often visible, even if the subject can not be identified. Despite their fragmentary state, they enrich Hatra's figurative repertoire and hence our knowledge of its cultural life and relations with the western world on one side and the Iranian on the other.

Apart from a fine face with an intense expression from the house near "private" shrine no. 2, probably that of a woman, approximately frontal and slightly leaning towards the right shoulder,⁴ the few other figures are those of two separate males, from the Eastern city gate.⁵ One is an interesting scene with several persons from the Northern palace, perhaps inspired by one at Dura.⁶ These are a few hunting scenes from Building A⁷ and two fragments from the Northern palace.⁸ Most of these subjects are not found in sculpture, and, at least some of them, seem to be specific to painting. Despite the scanty evidence of wall paintings, it seems that sculpture and painting are used for different purposes, i. e. the painting is not dependent on sculpture. On the contrary, the graffiti appear to depict, partially at least, both painting and sculpture.

Actually the many pictures scratched on the plaster coatings of the walls reveal a great number of subjects and styles that go beyond a simple popular expression. Both the quality of these graffiti, in fact, and the background of those who made them vary considerably. More evident perhaps, then in the sculptures, which are linked to an official culture and rendered somewhat uniform by the adoption of a rigid formal mode of representation of Parthian type,⁹ is the congeries of influences that characterize sites such as Hatra, Dura and Palmyra that lay at the cross roads of different worlds, which are primarily evident in their religious images and symbols.

What is offered here is just a preliminary overview of a very small sample of these graffiti that have never been closely studied,¹⁰ but which in my opinion, deserve comprehensive investigation. The problems are naturally vast and the solutions expected in the short term are likely very few, owing to the incompleteness of the documentation and any other related studies. Here we will consider only a few problems such as the representations and chronology. The graffiti are much more frequent than the paintings. As one can judge from Building A, most of the plastered walls were covered with more or less casually scratched drawings, signs, letters and inscriptions. Entire walls are filled which graffiti with often straddle and overlap each other so that the scene is can not be ascertained. Graffiti are not included in reports of Iraqi excavations at Hatra. It is thus impossible to calculate their frequency, com-

⁴ Safar/Mustafa 1974: Fig. 196. It is not clear if it is represented a young man or a woman. The bust is only partially preserved.

⁵ Ibrahim 1986: Pls. 174, 175.

⁶ al-Salihi 1996.

⁷ Venco Ricciardi 1996: 147–65.

⁸ al-Salihi 1996. The fragments of paintings that decorated the facade pierced by the access door to a probably private building on the Northern street (Venco Ricciardi 1989: 196–97, Fig. 13) give no idea of the subject nor the complexity or otherwise of the scene. The human figures shown on one of the plaster layers must have been quite large.

⁹ Scenes more varied from this standpoint are confined to those of western origin, which reproduce well-known cartoons, such as the centaureomachy, on architectural friezes and some objects (Safar/Mustafa 1974: Fig. 260; Downey 1966: 101–104).

¹⁰ Neugebauer 1954: 91; al-Shams 1981: 146–58; Ibrahim 1986: 157–64, Pls. 145–66, 169–71.

pile statistics of them or work out their association with different types of rooms and their possible functions.

It is difficult to say to what extent the plastered walls of the temples were covered with graffiti. Only one graffito, a very frontal representation of a female deity, perhaps Atargatis, from private shrine no. 3, has been published by Safar and Mustafa.¹¹ Nothing is mentioned with regard to the other places of worship.¹² Subjects are more varied than sculpture and are so strictly tied to religious themes; the graffiti seem to depict the actual environment of Hatra. Despite the scanty evidence we have, at least some idea of the subjects present in various forms at Hatra.

Religious subjects

As it could be expected from the importance of Hatra as a holy town, religious motifs are common, such as various kinds of deities, like the well known iconography of Shamash (Fig. 1), for example, who appears several times depicted, even in a naïve fashion, as a religious effigy on two steps.¹³ In the portrayal of Shamash, stress is laid on his attributes', those fully visible in the reliefs are not only rays, but also the mountains, or clouds, from which he rises. The Heracles figure, too, is depicted several times in the well known iconography of Hatran sculpture, more or less transformed, yet clearly identifiable by his total nudity, club and frequently lion-skin. In contrast to the other sculptures, he seems to have not only these attributes, but is shown standing and static. Evidently the most widely used figure of Heracles, found in both life-size statues¹⁴ and figurines,¹⁵ is that of a standing subject with the classical attributes, whereas he is never portrayed standing or reclining with a bowl in his hand in the graffiti. In some instances, indeed, we wonder if the imagination of the artist serves to contaminate and to distort the original model or if it is only a question of insufficient evidence. It is hard to find a model for some subjects that bear a general resemblance to known representations, yet display so many anomalies that their identification is mostly a matter of supposition. This is the case of the graffito depicting Heracles with an eagle on his head (Fig. 2), which could be an unusual representation of Heracles-Nergal,¹⁶ or Heracles-Gnda.¹⁷ Some variations, of course, may derive more from the model reproduced than the fancy of the author of a graffito. When a drawing shows consistent features to a clearly determinate milieu, it is possible the graffiti represent a model that has not survived.

The most striking example in this respect is a large graffito (Fig. 3), about 115 × 76, plus a 16 cm inscription, with nine figures, probably divinities, from a private house to the south of the temenos.¹⁸

¹¹ Safar/Mustafa 1974: 402.

¹² The very scanty traces that can still be discerned in "private" shrine no. 6 seem to be meaningless.

¹³ These steps may represent the double altar found in both the major temples and the private shrines, in other words, a large altar faced in marmor, reached via a few side steps, and a higher usually limestone altar bearing the effigy of the god.

¹⁴ See for example, al-Salihi 1973: Pls. XXX-XXXI.

¹⁵ Venco Ricciardi 1988: Fig. 33.

¹⁶ al-Salihi 1971.

¹⁷ al-Salihi 1982: 139. The figure seems to wear trousers. In my knowledge, no comparisons are available at Hatra.

¹⁸ This building has been excavated in 1992 under the direction of Hikmat Beshir, but has not yet been published.



Fig. 1. Hatra. Graffito of Shamash. From private house

One figure is very incomplete, with only the head and a few lines of the legs preserved. One of the others is female and another is definitely Heracles with his bare torso and club. The males seem to be all in western clothing, in short tunics or a short cloak fastened at the shoulders. It is not clear if they are wearing trousers. They are all wearing boots, whereas Heracles and the female figure are barefooted. The hair of two figures is bouffant, though not really tripartite, the others seem to have short hair. A platform with two steps is on the right part of the scene, whereas on the left there are horizontal lines that appear to simply indicate the ground. The figures are shown frontally, with one foot frontal and the other in profile in accordance with a typical Parthian pattern. They are not on the same plane and the impression of depth is enhanced by their partial overlapping.¹⁹ This elaborate composition is not found in the reliefs so far discovered elsewhere at Hatra and it is more properly compared with wall

¹⁹ It can not be said whether the heads below the platform and the other incomplete figure lower down belong to the same composition.

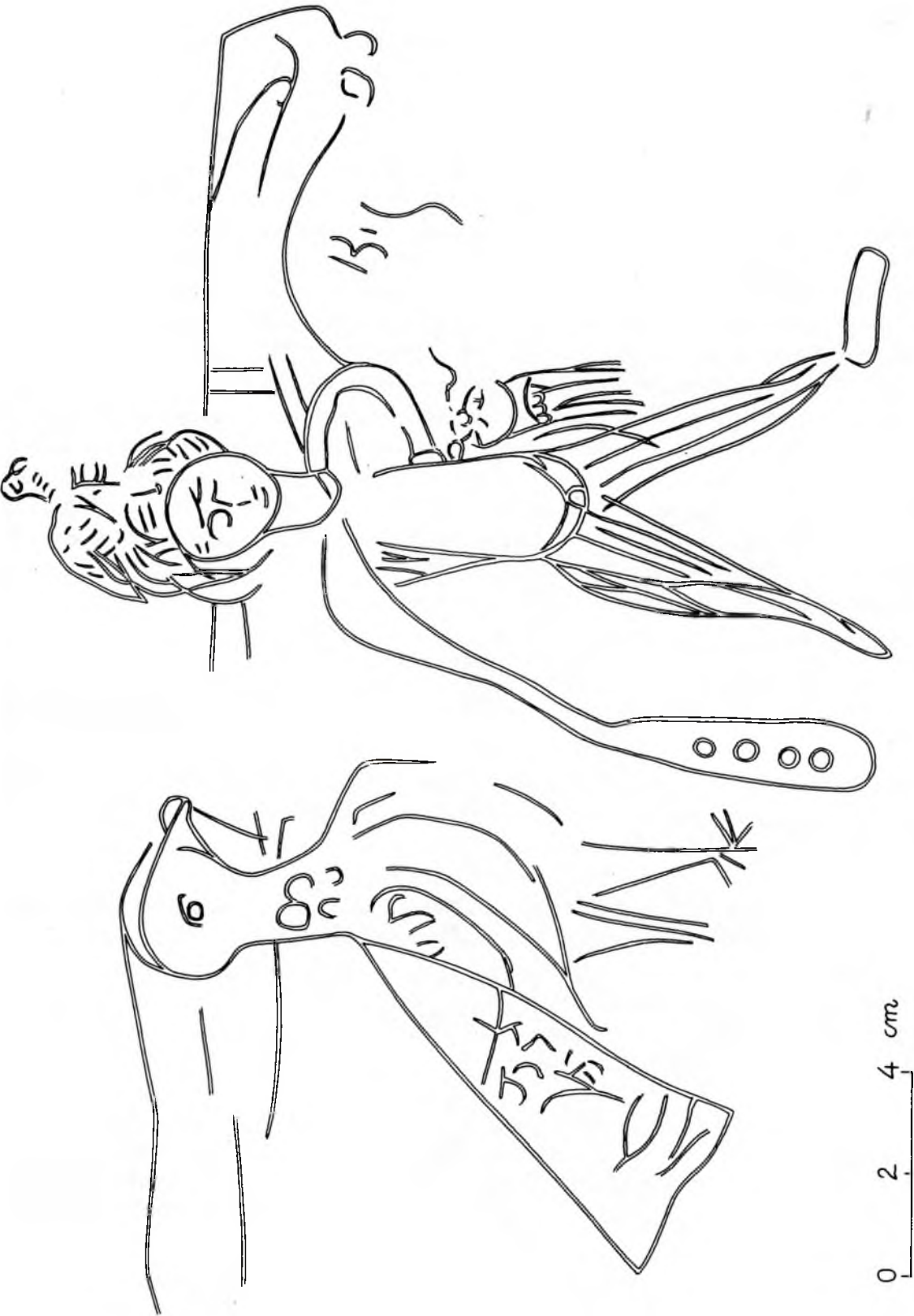


Fig. 2. Hatra. Graffito of Heracles. From Beit Ma'nu, room no. 46



Fig. 3. Hatra. Graffito of nine deities. From private house

paintings of the type found in the temple of Bel at Dura, such as the sacrifice of Conon or that of Julius Terentius.²⁰ Although no evidence is preserved at Hatra, we wonder if this graffiti was actually representing a larger wall painting, possibly from a shrine.

The figures are probably divinities of western origin represented in the climate of religious syncretism proper to a world at the cross-roads of different cultures. Actually the few preserved details do not allow any certain identification. A similar appearance is presented by seven marmor figurines from a private shrine no. 8.²¹ Although their attributes are clear, their identification is far from certain.

The Aramaic inscription above the figures has not yet been fully deciphered. The date, however, is reasonably clear. According to the Seleucid era used at Hatra, it is either A.D. 151–152 or 251–252, depending on whether the first upright stroke on the right belongs to the number or not. The earlier date coincides with the most flourishing period at Hatra's, the one that is best documented, and is close to the transition from that of the lords to that of the kings.²² The later date is, shortly after the taking of Hatra by Shapur I in A.D. 240–241. The city may well have survived this event and evidence of partial rebuilding is everywhere clear, even if no account is taken of a possible life under Dhaizan.²³ No signs of fire or violent destruction of the built-up part by the Sasanians has yet been appeared. There was no sudden interruption in the life of the city, therefore, and the late date would not lead to any major changes in the common historical view of Hatra.

As a matter of fact, even if the date is late, the graffiti seems to reflect the culture already well known from other materials at Hatra, particularly the sculptures and their iconography which fits well in the Parthian cultural koine as it appears in the wall paintings at Dura.

Hunting scenes

The hypothesis of a painted model for the graffiti with nine deities is strengthened by the evidence of other graffiti, particularly those with hunting scenes. In this group some closely similar scenes appear (Figs. 4, 5), with the same proportions, details, and arrangement of the figures, so much as to suggest the same artist is at work, but it may also reflect the use of the same model, which has not survived. They should probably have been painted, since hunting is usually a subject of murals²⁴ and it is not found in sculpture. As at Dura, the hunting subject appears in the decoration of private houses. Since it has no religious associations,²⁵ it was presumably confined, whether sculptured or painted, to the interiors of civil buildings. An Iranian stereotype is followed in both cities. The hunter, usually a rider, is firmly set on his

²⁰ Cumont 1926: Pls. XXXI, XLIX. The question of the artist naturally arises, as raised by al-Salihi (1996) for the paintings in the North palace. The person who drew this series of divinities was much more skilful than the drawer of Shamash. The skill and the possibility that the Hatra artist was a professional explain the great difference between the two drawings. In addition, the artist who drew the nine figures may have had a different cultural background.

²¹ Safar/Mustafa 1974: 282–83. According to the authors these are deities of the week days.

²² It should be noted that the plaster on which the graffiti is scratched is the last layer preserved. There are no other chronological data, since the excavation of the building has not yet been published.

²³ al-Salihi 1989–90.

²⁴ See the evidence from building A and the Northern palace above notes 7 and 8.

²⁵ The Mithraeum paintings at Dura are an obvious exception.



Fig. 4. Hatra. Graffito of a hunter. From Beit Ma'nu, room no. 46

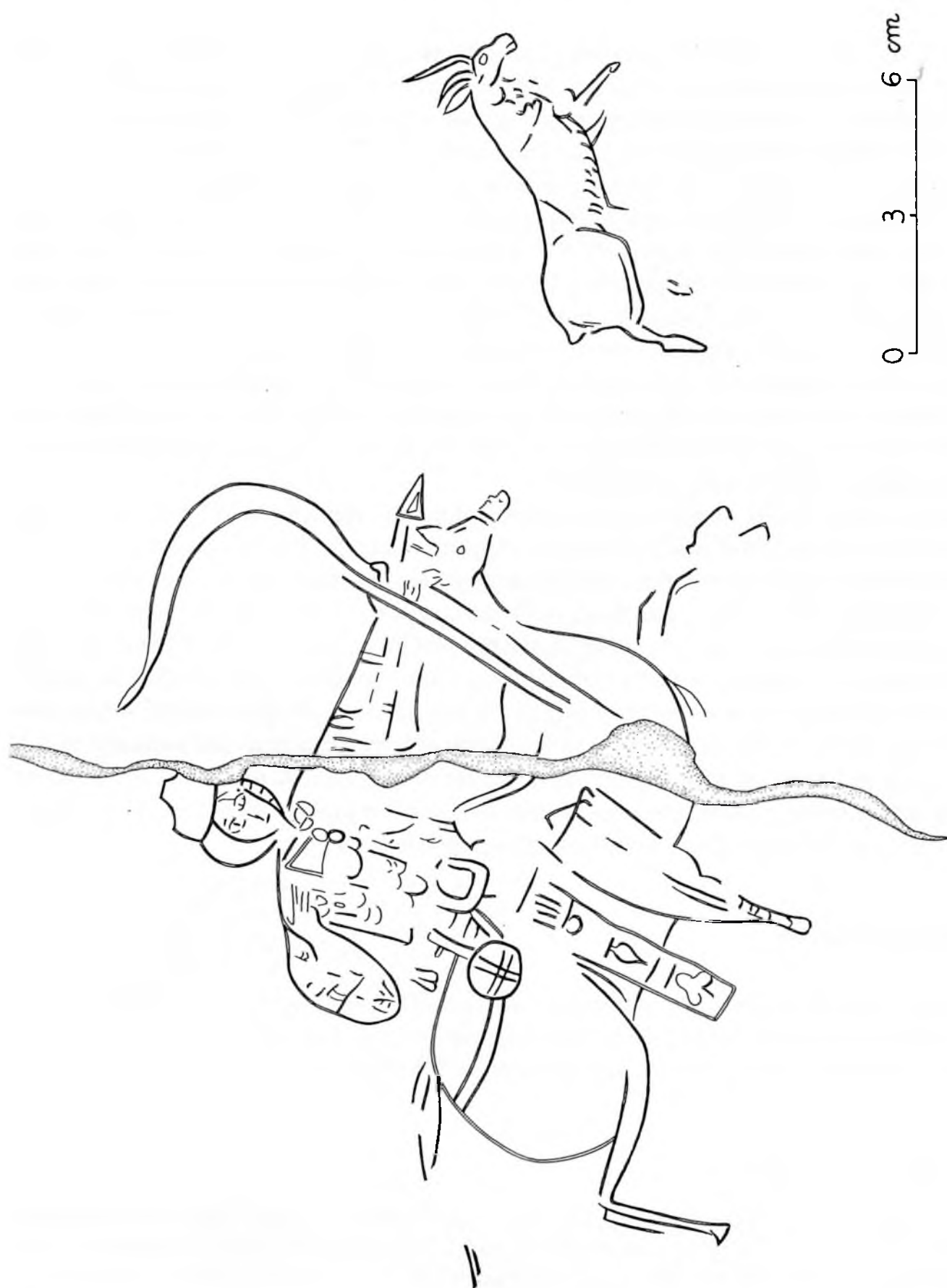


Fig. 5. Hatra. Graffito of a hunter. From Beit Ma'nu, room no. 59

horse, legs in profile and frontal torso, whereas the animals, usually in profile and at flying gallop, are generally represented more freely, due perhaps to differences in the breed portrayed, in keeping with a long-standing tradition, which was also followed in the later centuries.

Hunting scenes enjoyed the greatest popularity at Hatra. Since they belong to the daily life, they were represented in a vivacious manner. Simple or involved, large or small, incomplete or detailed, graffiti with hunting scenes appear on all the walls of the houses. The subject may be animals hunting each other, or hunters on foot or horses. In Building A, there are both stucco mouldings of a lion hunting deer on a vault bracket,²⁶ and large murals on the south, east and west walls of room S 15. Nothing is left of the north wall.²⁷ The subject of the south wall, and probably the west wall is a "gazelle" hunt, presumably typical of the Hatra region, and very common in the graffiti. The east wall, on the other hand, shows a boar hunt, something rarely found in the graffiti. In the hunting scene, both in paintings and in graffiti, the animals are shown in a lively manner, whereas the huntsman, usually on horseback, but also on foot, is motionless in a stereotyped posture, and with stereotyped weapons and clothing. The face alone in the murals, though not in the graffiti, is given a more lively appearance in a three-quarter view. The hunters are rarely depicted in an unusual position. The lion hunter with a dagger (Fig. 6) is unique at Hatra.

Some of these works display an interesting feature, the application of a peculiar convention which is usually found in later Sasanian art, particularly in rock reliefs and silver plates. The convention in question is the representation within the same scene of an animal both alive, usually already stricken, and dead. At Hatra it appears in the boar hunt painting and in some graffiti, such as the "gazelle" (Fig. 7) and the lion hunt (Fig. 6). It would thus seem that this convention was already a feature of Hatra's culture, irrespective of whether the graffiti spring from the experience of ordinary folk or are reproduction of more cultural works, such as paintings, now lost. Its use cannot be an indication of later work, since the paintings in S 15 would seem to be earlier than the fall of Hatra for stratigraphical reasons.²⁸ Some unusual clothing details seem to point to the same late period, but it is probably a matter of insufficient evidence, since no other sign of a Sasanian presence has been found.

Reclining figures

Reclining figures on klinai are uncommon at Hatra. Only one small size roughly painted figure has been found.²⁹ In the reliefs, the reclining position is usually confined to Heracles. Only two other male figures are known in sculpture.³⁰ Reclining figures are rarely found also

²⁶ Venco Ricciardi 1989: Fig. 14.

²⁷ Venco Ricciardi 1996.

²⁸ They are themselves almost totally covered with crowds of graffiti in various sizes and with various subjects. These are mainly taken from the usual repertoire, while the less common subjects, such as naked girls dancing and playing musical instruments, show some iconographical details of the Hatran sculptures. The bottom part of the plaster with its graffiti was restored later with a thick coat of mortar. The stratigraphy indicates that these phases are not very distant from each other in time.

²⁹ Ibrahim 1986: Pl. 174

³⁰ Nasru on the lintel of shrine no. 5 (Safar/Mustafa 1974: Fig. 237); Hywš from shrine no. 13 (al-Salihi 1990: Fig. 24).



Fig. 6. Hatra. Graffito of a lion hunter. From private house

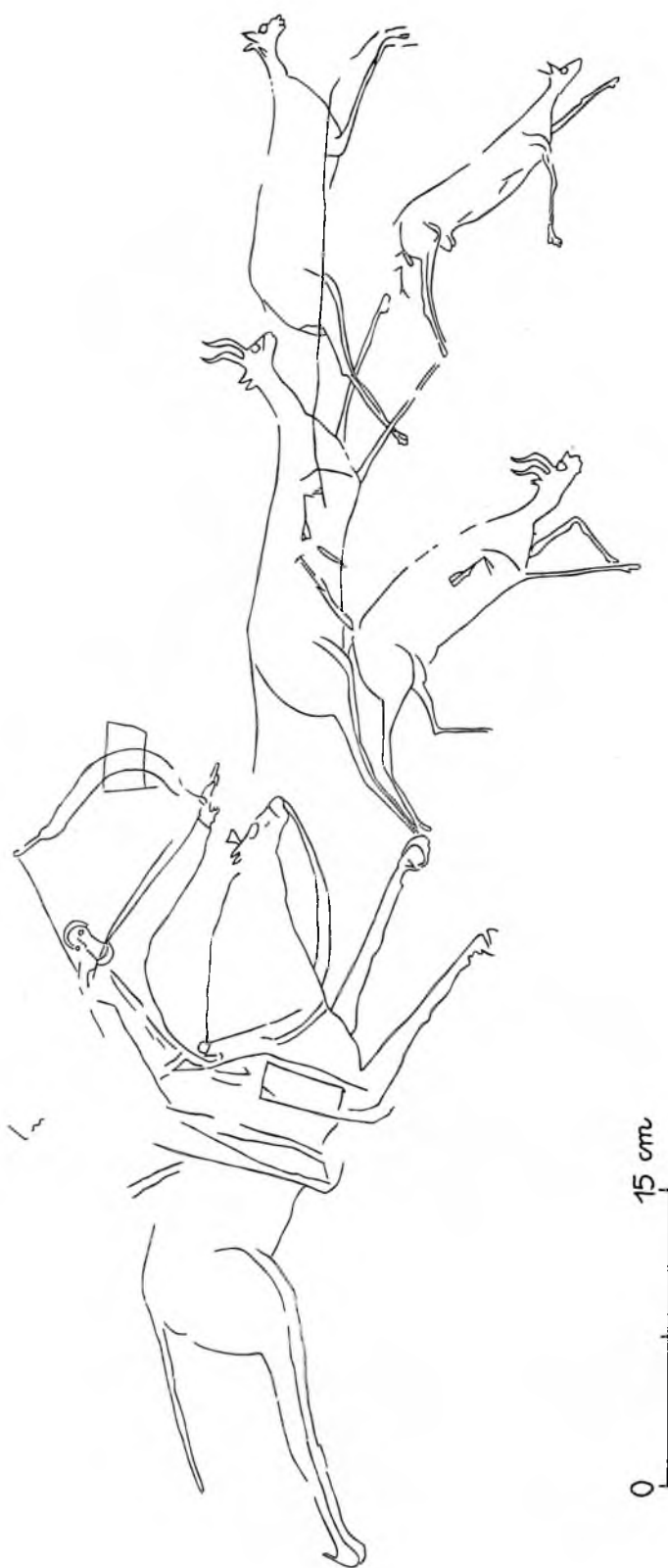


Fig. 7. Hatra. Graffito of a "gazelle" hunter. From private house

in graffiti. Some are stylised and roughly drawn, others are quick, stylized sketches that are more natural and of much better quality, with representations of the body taken from a world that seems foreign to Hatra as we know it (Fig. 8). A large graffito roughly sketched on the plaster of one of the small rooms of building A (Fig. 9) is particularly interesting as it may be an attempt to copy the figure of Nasru on the lintel of private shrine no. 5, which is located slightly to the north of building A, on the opposite side of the street. The subject is a recumbent male dressed in a long tunic and trousers of the Parthian manner, and portrayed in a rigid, frontal view. The bent right leg and the left arm resting on pillows are typical of reclining figures in the Parthian period. Some of the details in this crudely sketched drawing are reminiscent of the Nasru relief, especially the lozenge pattern on the tunic and trousers, which is uncommon at Hatra. The cup in the left hand, which is clear on the lintel, is usually found on Hatran reliefs.³¹ If the graffito actually intended to copy the Nasru relief, this suggests that the lintel was still *in situ*, or in all events still visible, and hence that the graffito is not long after the destruction of the shrine no. 5.³²

At Hatra, reclining figures are usually isolated. The exceptions are three small scenes depicting a group of reclining male figures, all on the same wall and all about the same size. The subject is presumably a banquet, since the most complete scene (Fig. 10) depicts four rigidly frontal figures reclining on klinai with another one which is probably a servant standing beside them. The three scenes do not form a single unit and are probably a repetition of the same subject.³³ It could depict either an actual scene or a simplified version of a painted model, such as those found at Dura in house M7 W.³⁴ Banquet scenes are very common on tomb reliefs at Palmyra, whereas there is nothing similar at Hatra.³⁵ An indication of the meaning, or at least the location, of these banquets can be drawn from one of these graffiti. One of the scenes (Fig. 11) is framed by a large arched structure whose two tiers and stepped crenellation recall the religious architecture of the large iwans still visible at Hatra.³⁶ These graffiti are probably depicting ceremonial banquets inside the temples, which may have possibly been held on the low, wide benches preserved along the walls of the cult rooms.

Chronology

The general date of the graffiti is a later phase of the city, since they are preserved on the last layer of the wall plaster, but they are not all necessarily of the same period. It is possible that

³¹ Nasru is holding an unusual kind of shallow cup in his left hand. A cup in the left hand is very commonly found on reliefs from Hatra, Palmyra, Elymais and on Dura paintings, but rarely on the graffiti. Here some lines could be interpreted as a misunderstanding of the motif itself.

³² Its partly mutilated statues seem to have been stored in a separate room after the fall of the city. The fate of the lintel is unknown. It was found in front of the shrine entrance (Safar/Mustafa 1974: 371).

³³ There are also many other graffiti in different styles and of different subjects on the same wall plaster.

³⁴ Perkins 1973: Figs. 25–26.

³⁵ In the Hatra tombs there is no evidence of funerary representations. Only in one tomb there are some traces of a wall painting. A hunter at least was depicted. His face, part of his arm and bow are still preserved.

³⁶ Representation of architecture are common enough in the graffiti at Hatra and Dura. At Hatra most of them seem to portray religious buildings, temples facades and aedicules with one or two storeys. These very rough sketches succeed in catching both the details of the temples as we now see them and others that have disappeared, but can be imagined from the fragments on the ground, and are thus a valuable source of information in the same way as the stone models of buildings found at Hatra (Safar/Mustafa 1974: Figs. 145a–b; 263).



Fig. 8. Hatra. Graffito of a reclining figure. From building adjacent to E city gate, room no. 3



Fig. 9. Hatra. Graffito of a reclining figure. From Building A, room S 18

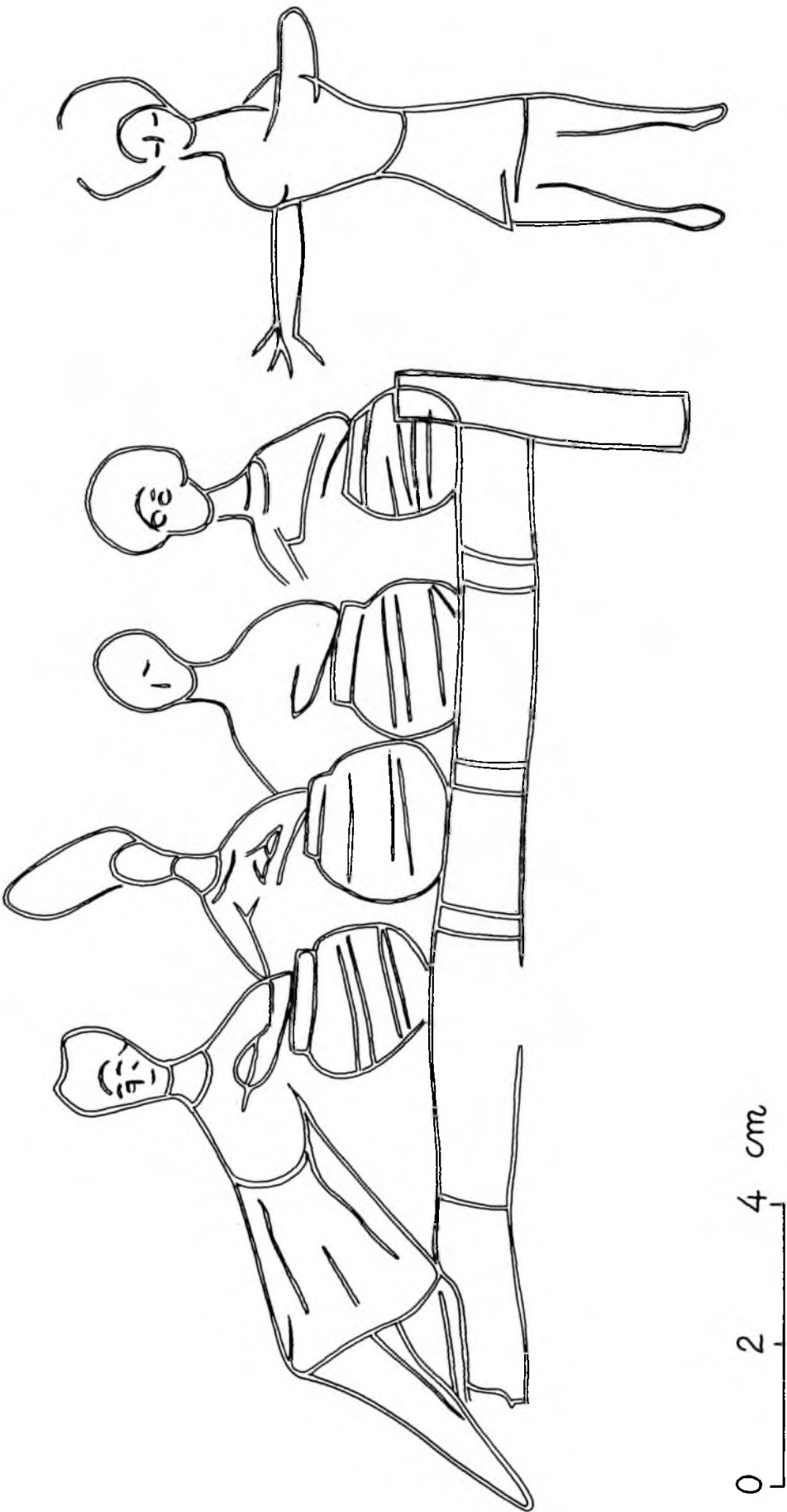


Fig. 10. Hatra. Graffito of a banquet scene. From Beit Ma'nu complex, room no. 61

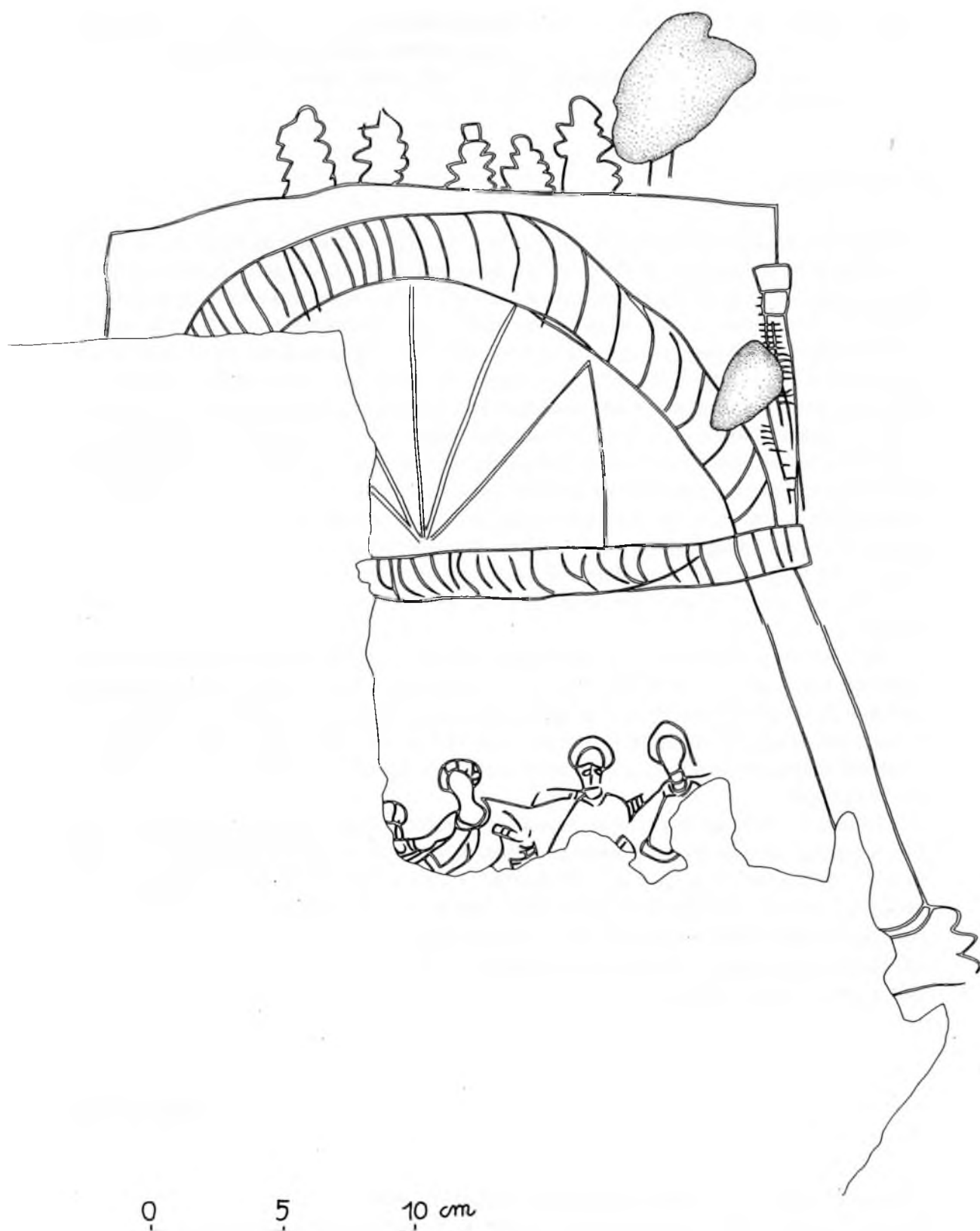


Fig. 11. Hatra. Graffito of a banquet scene. From Beit Ma'nu complex, room no. 61

at least some of them were scratched after the fall of the city, as the inscribed date in the graffito with the nine gods suggests. A few graffiti do not reflect the cultural world of Hatra and seem to be further removed chronologically as well. In at least one case they are linked to the reconstruction of the architecture.

Conclusions

If the graffiti are depict the world of Hatra's, they are a clear reference to what can be seen in its monuments, and provide an idea of other, more cultured forms of artistic expression, not just spontaneous, popular representations of the world. What influences the interpretation and possible reconstruction of the subject is the quality of representing it, which varies widely from the cultivated drawing of the figure with a rich array of naturalistic details taken from life to the fully naïve style, of an albeit expressive, yet infantile sketch with the details essential to the understanding of the subject shown in a very approximate manner. A few iconographical details may be different, but this could reflect only the present state of documentation. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that in main the subjects and partially the styles, are similar to the paintings and sculpture at Hatra and the Parthian cultural milieu, though one cannot say whether this means that they were done after the fall of the city, or whether the fall itself brought no great change in the city's culture. The subjects of the graffiti, even more than those of the sculpture, give a good idea of the culture of Hatra's population in the late period. The more cultivated subjects are imported from the West, such as the unusual centauromachy.

Beyond the general style, and quite apart from the skill of individual artists, different types are much more evident here than in the sculpture, which is more official, rigid and uniform. Since all the graffiti can be dated to the late period, either before or slightly after Hatra's fall, it appears that different styles were used at the same time. So the more freely scratched drawings seem to give a better idea of the complexity of Hatra's cultural world in the late period.

To sum up, these graffiti offer an interesting glimpse of Hatra's cultural environment and life in general. Despite the uncertainty as to their date and the weight that should be accorded to their representativeness, they provide an idea of some of the artistic forms which are not preserved, such as painting and architecture. On the other hand, through an informal, free representation of the world around, they are a significant source for the more varied view of life at Hatra and suggest that our current opinion of Hatra as a mainly religious city is only partly correct and incomplete.

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